

## ***NOAA Fisheries-led Group Forecasts Strong Returns of Key Northwest Salmon Runs in 2003***

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March 21, 2003

Adult coho and chinook salmon from the West Coast now in the ocean and preparing to return to their native streams or hatcheries are showing up in historical numbers, according to early estimates compiled by a group led by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries). NOAA is an agency of the Commerce Department.

Preliminary numbers show "ocean abundance" estimates for Oregon coastal and Columbia River naturally spawned and hatchery coho salmon up 185 percent over the recent 10-year average of actual returns. Predications for 2003 indicate that the number of adult salmon may reach more than 984,000.

"This high forecast of coho about to return to Northwest rivers is great news," said Bob Lohn, regional administrator of the NOAA Fisheries Northwest regional office in Seattle. "It's way above last year's estimate of 434,100 adults and could represent the fourth consecutive year of potential coho returns near or above a million fish."

A team of state, tribal and NOAA Fisheries biologists presented the numbers to the Pacific Fishery Management Council at its meeting in Sacramento last week. Although actual ocean abundance of salmon can vary from these estimates, the council sets annual harvest levels for salmon fishing on the West Coast based on these pre-season numbers. (To view the complete report visit: <http://www.pcouncil.org/salmon/salpreI03/salpreI03.html>).

The council will recommend how many salmon can be harvested and release those numbers in April for approval by NOAA Fisheries. The majority of the returning salmon for which the council sets harvest limits, such as Oregon coastal and Columbia River coho, are from hatcheries and are generally not listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The harvests are designed to minimize impacts on salmon listed under the ESA.

In addition to Oregon Coast coho, the preliminary forecasts for Washington coast and Puget Sound coho returns are also showing significant increases over recent actual returns. Predictions call for more than 215,500 naturally spawned coho to return to Washington coast rivers in 2003, an increase of 138 percent over 2001 actual returns. Puget Sound naturally spawned coho are predicted to be nearly double 2001's actual returns of 280,000, with an estimated return of 536,400. (Complete 2002 actual returns are not yet available.)

Similarly, the preliminary numbers show high forecasts for many Northwest chinook runs. Columbia Basin upriver summer chinook continue to return at levels not seen since the 1950s. Columbia Basin upriver summer chinook returns are forecast to be near 90,000 for 2003. Also this year, Mid-Columbia River fall brights are estimated to return at record levels, with about 105,000 fish expected. These forecast returns for both Columbia Basin upriver summer chinook

and Mid-Columbia River fall brights represent a tripling of the actual returns from just three years ago.

“This is yet the latest in a continuing positive trend that we’re seeing for Pacific Northwest salmon runs,” said Lohn. “These estimates are good news for fishermen and are evidence that our efforts to recover salmon runs are having an effect.”

Lohn underscored, however, that these high forecasts for many runs do not eliminate the region’s need to continue recovery efforts of ESA-listed salmon runs. “While a number of ESA-listed salmon runs are exhibiting marked improvement, many listed runs remain in a condition that requires our continued diligence to ensure that they all share in the improved returns,” said Lohn. NOAA Fisheries biologists said favorable ocean conditions are contributing to the strong returns, but also said that conservation efforts already undertaken in the Northwest have played a role in improving the numbers of naturally spawned coho and chinook.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.

The Commerce Department’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation’s coastal and marine resources. To learn more about NOAA, please visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.